

Questionnaire from the Philharmonie Zuidnerland for a performance of Debussy Preludes in April 2016

When did it become clear to you that you wanted to become a composer, what inspired you?

I was a late starter, with no conventional musical background. Discovering the works of Mahler in the centenary year of 1960, when I was 14, convinced me that I wanted to follow a musical path. But although I started to compose at that age, it took me a long time to develop a personal style. I wrote a great deal of music then, but there is very little, if anything, written before 1970 that I would now wish to hear.

Could you say something about the nature of your work with Gustav Holst's daughter, Imogen Holst?

I was working as an editorial assistant to Benjamin Britten in the early 1970s when I first met Imogen in Aldeburgh. She asked me to help with compiling a Thematic Catalogue of her father's music, and this led to a collaboration which lasted until her death in 1984. We edited a number of her father's works for a facsimile edition, including *The Planets*, and I was able to persuade her to allow several of his early works to be published. She was one of the most musical people I have ever met, and much of our time together was spent simply talking about music.

You celebrate your seventieth birthday (congratulations!) If all ensembles and musicians needed, were available, what would be the perfect birthday concert program, with your work, for you; what pieces would you choose to show the audience: this is me as a composer? And why?

It happens that there is a planned concert in June by the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra which will, I hope, include the two works that probably mean most to me : one is the orchestral piece *Broken Symmetry* from 1992, in which I achieved a long term wish to write a huge 'scherzo' - the work lasts 20 minutes and is at an unremittingly fast tempo. The other is my Violin Concerto, written for Leila Josefowicz in 2009 : it has a balance of dynamism and lyricism with which I am very happy.

You did not only orchestrate Debussy. On a list of your work on the website of Faber Music I also saw Sibelius, Schubert, Mahler... And I read you worked on completing Mahler's Tenth. What does that mean to you, did you have to get 'into the skin' of the other composer? And how did that work: In the case of the Debussy, did you study orchestra works by Debussy? How did you decide what instrument plays what? What does it mean to you to have done this, did it influence you as a composer writing your own music?

I learned more from the reconstruction of Mahler's Tenth Symphony than from anything else as a young composer, and this 'getting inside the skin' of another composer has remained very important to me. In one sense it's a relatively straightforward thing to do - I don't have to find the notes myself! - but obviously I take it seriously, and it has become an essential part of my way of working (I don't always want to be composing...). In the process of orchestrating Debussy I was trying to find a way to convert these wonderful pieces into works that would not sound as if they could have been written for piano - so that anyone who tried to transcribe them back would end up with something quite different from the originals. And I deliberately didn't look at any Debussy scores for the duration of this 7-year project - I was determined not to write 'pastiche' Debussy orchestration. Being so close to this music had a big influence on me - for a while I found myself thinking compositionally in three or four minute miniatures, and it took some while to get back to writing on a larger scale.

What are the differences between French and English music. Is there such a thing as 'English music'. If so, could you characterise that? What could you say about Holst and Adès when thinking about this?

The term 'English music' sometimes conjures up a conservative, pastoral kind of style, which doesn't appeal to me at all. Unfortunately it often extends to a composer like Elgar, who is considered too 'English' to travel, but whose very fine music is in fact influenced largely by German models - Brahms, Wagner and Strauss. Holst was a strange mixture, very open to influence (Wagner early on, then Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Debussy, mixed in with English folk music) and so well known for *The Planets* that the originality both of this work and of his whole output is usually overlooked. Tom Adès I have known since he was a student - an alarmingly gifted one! - and it has never occurred to me to think of him as an 'English' composer - hardly possible for someone whose antecedents include Janáček and Kurtág.

I'm not sure that I can characterise 'English' music. Perhaps the most significant element is a tendency to be open to all kinds of music, an avoidance of the doctrinaire. For myself both French and German music have been a major influence - the fluidity and almost improvisatory nature of Ravel and Debussy's music means as much to me as the contrapuntal and structural wonders of Mahler, Strauss and Schoenberg. Not to mention Stravinsky, Scriabin, Sibelius, and of course the many composers of our time whose work I find inspiring.

Do you consider yourself to be an 'English' composer?

In a word, no! That is to say, I don't consider that I belong to an English tradition - my roots are, I think, elsewhere. At the same time it wouldn't be right to suggest that I have altogether escaped the influence of English music; but I think it's for others, not for me, to identify where that can be found.

I read about your piece Pluto, the Renewer and listened to it on YouTube. Did you know that recently a new, until now unknown planet, was discovered: a mysterious, icy, giant gas planet, even further away than Neptune or Pluto. Its existence was calculated out of the movements of several dwarf planets by Californian scientists. One of them is Michael Brown, he is the man who, with his work, caused that Pluto is no longer called a planet, but a dwarf planet.

Would you consider to compose a piece for this new 'ninth' planet? And, could you say something about the mysterious process in which you 'find'/'create' music for an object, like a planet...

I have always had a great fascination for astronomy - I knew that Pluto was not 'really' a planet when I came to write *Pluto* - although that is a complicated issue : the standards by which Pluto was demoted from being a planet, so would Earth be if it were in the same orbit as Pluto. As for the new planet, I would certainly not write another piece if and when it is actually discovered (rather than calculated to be there) - one extra piece is enough! In fact I was somewhat reluctant to write *Pluto* in the first instance, and only accepted the challenge because I was aware that if I didn't write it, someone else, who might not know *The Planets* as well as I did, would be asked.

How did I write it? With some difficulty, well aware of the remarkable ending to *The Planets* that Holst achieved; so it had to begin as if out of nowhere, and it had to be very contrasting - I couldn't have written music that was more remote than *Neptune*. And at the end of *Pluto* I implied that Holst's final movement was still going on in the background. I can understand that some people do not think it an appropriate addition - but they don't have to listen to it!